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DRIFT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfilment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

By
Emily Jane Cook
B.F.A. Ontario College of Art and Design
August 2008

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ABSTRACT

Drift is a movement by, or as if by, a current of air or water¹. It can mean the depositing of debris by such a current. It can also connote a veering off from a projected path. What interests me about the word is that it suggests a slight loss of control, but not a devastating one. Most importantly, for this body of work, it implies a passive movement, a transition in which one is not able to control every part. We can perhaps choose the river we get into but not the direction of its flow.

Using properties of handmade paper as an intrinsic part of the work, I have explored ideas of transition in a number of ways. First, material—the process of changing things from solid to liquid to solid again in papermaking by combining and removing water; second, by suggesting the blurred shift from land to water in swamplands; third, through the idea of journey, which is suggested by the imagery of the boats; and, finally, through use of imagery that lies between abstraction and representation. By walking that particular visual line the work creates poetic imagery, a visual reverie or daydream. It seeks to walk a line between conscious and unconscious thought allowing for the work to be open-ended and suggestive.

¹ "drift." *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 2004.

DRIFT

Drift is a movement by, or as if by, a current of air or water². It can mean the depositing of debris by such a current. It can also connote a veering off from a projected path. What interests me about the word is that suggests a slight loss of control, but not a devastating one. Most importantly, for this body of work, it implies a passive movement, a transition in which one is not able to control every part. We can perhaps choose the river we get into but not the direction of its flow.

Louisiana is well suited as a place to talk about transitions and transitional space. Its land is unstable on a very high water table. The Mississippi cuts through large areas of the state; the coastline dissolves slowly through wetlands and the Mississippi Delta region into the Gulf of Mexico, a coastline that is in constant flux due to massive erosion. Land and water exist in transition everywhere, but here that transition is more evident. Cypress trees have adapted to live in both wet land and water; they send up tree roots called knees above the waterline to maintain adequate oxygen. It makes Louisiana a place that is unusually full of life but it also makes it a state under constant threat from nature. As I write this, the Mississippi River is very high. Last week the spillway near New Orleans was opened for the first time in 70 years. The land that usually exists between the Baton Rouge levee and the Mississippi is completely under water. A layer of algae drifts on top of it. When I stand at the top of the levee, the river is only a few feet below me. If I turn my back to the river, the road and the neighborhood I live in are more than twenty feet below me. The river feels heavy and threatening, and while the levees are likely to hold back the waters this time, memories of when they failed are all too recent and fresh.

This body of work addresses transition in four ways. First, material—the process of changing things from solid to liquid to solid again in papermaking by combining and removing water; second, by suggesting the blurred shift from land to water in swamplands; third, through the

² "drift." *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 2004.

idea of journey, which is suggested by the imagery of the boats; and, finally, through use of imagery that lies between abstraction and representation. By walking that particular visual line the work creates poetic imagery, a visual reverie or daydream. It seeks to walk a line between conscious and unconscious thought allowing for the work to be open-ended and suggestive.

In his book *The Forest of Symbols*, anthropologist Victor Turner coined the term “liminal period”³ to refer to a ritually transitional period between two more stable states, he was specifically concerned with the transition between childhood and adulthood. During liminal periods possibilities are open that are not during the more closed periods of childhood and adulthood where the roles are clearly defined. This is not to say that either childhood or adulthood is without transition but that this liminal time is a period of marked rapid transition between two more stable periods. I think this marked transitional period is a useful idea when talking about the body of work I have created for *Drift*. My work draws a parallel from the transitional nature of Louisiana’s physical landscape to evoke periods of transition and blurred boundaries in our lives.

While I think Turner’s idea is useful, it is perhaps deceptive to think of “stable states” when it comes to either land or human lives. It is, perhaps, more the case that there are periods of rapid and slow transition for both people and land. I have spent my life drifting from one place to another, and while moving may stress change, it is clear that change happens with or without the disruption of a change of location and friends. In this body of work I try to induce thoughts of transition and change through carefully linked material and content. In this case I used handmade paper because, as a material, it embodies and records change in its making.

The making of paper is a matter of a changing relationship between plant matter and water. Water is combined with dry cellulose material to create pulp. Water is then squeezed out of that pulp to make paper. The longer the pulp is processed with the water (beating), the more hydrated it

³ Turner, Victor, *The Forest of Symbols*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1970, p. 93

becomes. This means the pulp retains more water for a longer period of time. As the water evaporates it causes the paper to shrink, potentially dramatically, as we shall see. The conditions in which the paper dries during the time when it is changing from pulp to paper also play a crucial part. This meeting of environment and material, which is intrinsic to the making of paper, is one that I seek to exploit conceptually. It is one I think is well suited to my thinking.

Whatever material I work with, I feel I'm extracting the spirit that already lives within it. This is quite the opposite of the Platonistic view of working and thinking, in which you impose your ideas on the material.⁴
Anselm Kiefer

Papermaking is a slow process and therefore lends itself to evoking thoughts of passing time and change. As stated, the process of making paper is a process of transition of material, cellulose to pulp to paper. That transition of material is altered by the transitions in the environment surrounding this process. The time it takes to dry a paper object and the conditions under which it dries fundamentally changes the object. This means the material itself has a voice in the making of the object. It contributes a gesture that demarcates its life from dry plant matter to liquid pulp to dry paper. When all the water has left, it is frozen in time. It keeps a memory of the drying process and is warped and changed by its rate of drying and shrinking which is itself altered by the weather. When it finally dries, it shows the scars of that process. It has a physical memory.

Papermaking has a long history, but the idea of using paper as more than a substrate, a base upon which other elements are supported, but rather as the medium itself, is relatively new. In drawing or printmaking, paper is an element but frequently an almost invisible one. Even in Japan, where paper has a longer history, and where it has been used for a multitude of practical functions uncommon in the west⁵, it has been rarely used as an artistic medium in and of itself. Using paper as more than just a substrate offers a voice which cannot be achieved in any other way; medium and

⁴ Wright, K "Anselm Kiefer: The Ruins of Barjac" *Modern Painters*. Nov 2006, p. 71

⁵ For a detailed description of uses of paper in Japan see *The History of Papermaking* by Dard Hunter

content become amalgamated. This way of thinking can be observed in a number of contemporary artists using paper as a medium, including Winifred Lutz, Amanda Degener, Leslie Dill and Helmut Becker. The medium, when carefully considered, as these artists do, facilitates certain thoughts and ideas. The *material* provides meaning to the work; that is, it contributes to the experience of thinking of the work.

Considering and understanding the nature of paper became an important part of my project. I have chosen to use high shrinkage pulps which intensify a particular nature that I respond to, a nature that is marked and changed by its making in a way that cannot be entirely controlled by the artist. The environmental conditions and the pulp itself become collaborators. As Winifred Lutz said:

High shrinkage in paper is simply an attribute. Point of view makes it an opportunity or a liability. This small experience is a model for all our experience, for we always have the option either to confront all perceivable phenomena with inflexible preliminary resolve or to try to examine how they are what they are. In the first case, we have decided what they are through limitations before we begin; in the second, we seek to discover their nature. Perhaps it is inexhaustible, for discovery allows collaboration and the creation of new relationships. It has been my experience that this course reveals the extraordinary which is always available in the so-called commonplace.⁶

High shrinkage pulp is achieved though both fiber choice and the processing of that fiber. Flax and Abaca, the two fibers I have used, are naturally high shrinkage and translucent. This nature can be exaggerated through a long period of beating⁷. Here, rather than the mechanistic alteration that is common to most artistic mediums, I am setting up possibilities that will be changed by environmental conditions. This is not the only possible relationship for an artist to have with her material. Gaston Bachelard speaks of a more adversarial relationship between artist and material.

A certain Romantic writer, who also painted in his spare time, believed himself to be taking a vow of realism when he declared: "As far as I am concerned, the

⁶Lutz, Winifred, "Shrinking to Expand" *A Gathering of Papermakers*. ed. Elaine Koretsky, Brookline, Massachusetts, Carriage House Press, p52

⁷ Beating is the process by which the fiber is combined with water and masticated to create pulp

external world exists." The engraver commits himself further: for him, matter [matière, which can also be translated as material] exists. And its existence is immediate beneath his hand as he works it. Stone, slate, wood, copper, zinc. . . . Paper, too, with its grain, its fiber, tempts the hand that dreams of a duel of delicacies. Matter, then, is the first adversary of the poet of the hand. It possesses all the multiplicity of the hostile world, the world to be dominated. The true engraver approaches his work in a reverie of will. He is a workman. He is an artisan. All the glory of labor is his.⁸

While I am sympathetic to the immediacy of material, the “glory” of the labor is not mine. I am not “dominating it.” Rather I am collaborating with it and considering what it is that the material nature of my medium brings to the work.

The paper’s materiality plays a role in the work. This is showcased by the process of flexible mould making⁹ that I used to create two of the boats in this project: *Outburst* [Figure 1] and *Decay* [Figure 2].



Figure 1: Outburst 20' by 36' by 34' 2008

⁸ Bachelard, Gaston. *The Right to Dream*. Dallas, Texas: Dallas Institute of Humanities, 1988.
p 51

⁹ More information on flexible mould casting can be found in *Hand Papermaking*, Spring 1986, Vol. 1 No.1 pp.16-22



Figure 2: *Decay* 120' by 36' by 48' 2008

The pulps used were abaca beaten for ten hours and flax beaten for six and eight hours. The high shrinkage rates of both of these pulps mean that they would physically move the mould as they dried. The pulp was poured in layers into the mould; due to the shape of the mould not all of the pulp could be poured at once. This led to different drying rates at different points in the sculpture, thus giving the paper an opportunity to participate in shaping the piece. This process records the passage of time in that the drying conditions of any one day would affect the process of drying and thus the finished product. [Figures 3,4 and 5].



Figure 3 The Flexible Mould



Figure 4 Pouring Pulp into the Mould



Figure 5 Pulp Drying in The Mould

The resulting object is therefore a record of the time in which it was made: scarred and changed by conditions of time and place. The flexible mould provided a set of possibilities and the material and environmental conditions collaborated to create the rest. In *Outburst*, [Figure1] flax pulp was also patched over the top of the poured surface leading to layers of peeling pulp. This look of disintegration supports the idea of the passage of time by making the boat appear old and abandoned. It now gives us the feeling of something that was once made for a purpose, but is now in the process of returning to nature and living a new life.

There is something unnervingly corporeal about high shrinkage pulp. In particular, when it is combined with the more skeletal boat structures, one cannot help but think of skin. The boats are made to be one person vessels because they are meant to evoke the journey of one person. The fact that they seem almost biological in nature only adds to this sense that they are stand-ins for people. They are evidence left behind.

A sense of place is integrated into them, not only through the influence of environmental conditions, but also through the use of local materials. The armatures of the boats were made in part with local branches and bamboo that I gathered and in part with imported materials such as kozo

and cotton. The pulps used were all imported but chosen for their ability to be highly influenced by their environment. This allows them to have a blurred identity. While they are made of both local and imported materials, it is the place and time in which they were made which changes the results, creating something new out of something old. The act of making them acknowledges some of my own losses. They refer to my own process of abandonment and growth. Each boat exists in a different stage of decomposition, or reclamation by nature.

This manipulation of highly beaten pulp is also in evidence in *Paper Forest* [Figures 6 and 7].



Figure 6 *Paper Forest*, 72" x 36" 2008



Figure 7 detail of *Paper Forest*

These sheets were formed on a vacuum table deliberately creating areas of thin and thick pulp that would dry at different rates and therefore curl and buckle in a suggestive way. [Figures 8, 9 and 10].



Figure 8 Pouring the Pulp



Figure 9 Placing the Kozo



Figure 10 Manipulating



Figure 11 On the Drying Rack



Figure 12 Drying 1



Figure 13 Drying 2

Cooked kozo bark was also introduced to provide a structure for the paper to react against. The sheets created are evocative of skin and bark but also due to their curling and opening suggest the turning of the page of a book, involving reminders of the various uses of paper. I had envisioned initially the creation of a large tunnel book that would evoke a forest and these pages are the vestiges of that idea. The idea of creating an environment of forest and pages that could be passed through still remains.

Poets have often written of the transitions of life. Dante's *Inferno* starts with the famous lines:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
ché la diritta via era smarrita.
Dante's 'Inferno'

'Midway this way of life we're bound upon,
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone'
Translation by Dorothy L. Sayers¹⁰

Walt Whitman speaks of life's journey in *The Untold Want*:

The untold want by life and land ne'er granted,
Now voyager sail thou forth to seek and find.
Walt Whitman¹¹

There is a reason the first line of Dante's *inferno* is so often quoted and so often translated. In transitional periods it is easy to be lost. The metaphor of losing one's way in a forest resonates with people who, when faced with their own future, may well feel it is difficult to see a way forward. It is such an apt and clear metaphor that it is difficult to speak of life without referring back to it. One "makes their way through life," "chooses a direction" or "finds their path". Water offers another metaphor of wide open uncharted spaces, or of drifting down a river whose currents choose the way for us. To say life is a journey is a cliché but a cliché with a certain undeniable force.

¹⁰ Alighieri, Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Hell*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers, Penguin Classics, 1950

¹¹ Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*: Doubleday, 1997

Louisiana's landscape adds another layer to that metaphor of making pathways. One is not given this illusion of stability by the landscape here. Therefore the "right road" is a less predictable concept. Making a way through it is made difficult for humans by the mixture of water and soil and trees in the swamplands and also because that balance of water and land is apt to change dramatically. Change in Louisiana conspicuous. Water levels change so that what once was land is no longer land. Soil is deposited elsewhere so that there is new land where there was never land before. It is clear that permanence is an illusion. Nature will change and reclaim what we thought of as enduring. The land surges and breaks up the roads and the sidewalks. Spring rains bring localized flooding that can be quite deep, even when it does not damage property. Streets may, for several hours, be a river. Houses are raised on cinderblocks to cope with this possibility, rather than sunk in the ground in the more usual way. Land shifts everywhere it is true but here land shifts, not in the slow creep of continental drift, but by the dramatic influence of water.



Figure 14 Installation View

Water as a symbol also carries its own force. In *Water and Dreams*, Bachelard discusses what makes water, for him, an essentially different element from earth, fire and air.

One cannot bathe twice in the same river because already, in his inmost recesses, the human being shares the destiny of flowing water. Water is truly the transitory element. It is the essential, ontological metamorphosis between fire and earth. A being dedicated to water is a being in flux. He dies every minute; something of his substance is constantly falling away. Daily death is not fire's exuberant form of death, piercing heaven with its arrows; daily death is the death of water. Water always flows, always falls, always ends in horizontal death. In innumerable examples . . . for the materializing imagination, death associated with water is more dream-like than death associated with earth.¹²

Water's nature is one of transition and constant change like that of human existence. By creating allusions to water that flow both from within the trees and onto the floor, [Figure 14] and by dealing with the imagery of boats I am speaking directly to that transitory nature. Making this work in Louisiana adds a depth and a broadening to the water imagery because of the particular relationship of water and land here. The boat in the forest does not seem so strange. Boats that have been designed for swamps are built flat because the water is barely water just as the land is barely land. Cypress trees raise their knees out of the water to breathe. Nature here has adapted to its transitional standing.

When the work is installed there is no directed path. As you move through the space you are expected to choose your own path and to make some of your own discoveries. Not all of the work will be visible from any one point in the room. There will be no "right road."

Evoking the images of the river, the boat and the forest also allows me to explore the journey from multiple standpoints. Each image brought its own sense of what it is to be in transition. The materials themselves also brought a significant force that reinforced this concept of transition and change. Perhaps by focusing on finding a certain comfort in transition and change we can leave behind any idea of "stable state" when it comes to human lives and open ourselves up to

¹² Bachelard, Gaston, *Water and Dreams*, trans, Farrell, Edith, Dallas Institute of Humanities, Dallas, Texas, 1999

the possibilities that transition allows and stability denies. By making paper I have been able to take advantage of the properties of my materials to merge content and medium. I have negotiated a balance between control and chance by setting up possibilities for collaboration with nature through weather, locally found materials and paper. In the process I hope I have set up new possibilities for other people to explore.

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VITA

Emily Cook was born in Ottawa, Canada, and grew up as a Foreign Service brat living in Senegal, Greece and Canada. She first encountered handmade paper during her undergraduate studies at the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto where she received her BFA in 2005. In August of 2005 she moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to begin her master's at LSU. She has since devoted most of her time at LSU to studying papermaking, its properties and the unique qualities it can bring to art work. After three years in Louisiana she has developed a great fondness for its landscape and the people she has met here. She will be returning to Canada in 2008.